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——Honor et nomen divinis vatibus atque
Carminibus venit ... Hor. ars. poet. v. 400.

Around the poets' brow & lyre divine.
Unspotted wreaths of deathless glory shine.

Aeron.

WHETHER the first writers of a new nation, or of one just advancing into civilisation, make use of prose, or verse, as the medium of conveying their sentiments, although it has not been a subject of much dispute, has nevertheless admitted of a doubt. A notice of a memoir of M. Thiebault's on this subject furnished us the hint

for writing on it; and although we have been unable to procure the work alluded to, we shall take the side which he has supported, by endeavoring to shew, that poetry is the language of the infancy of letters.

There are, unquestionably, many formidable objections against this hypothesis. Among these, are, first, the greater difficulty of writing in verse than in prose; and secondly, the probability that historical record was first committed to writing in the plainest & shortest manner possible.

The transactions of the earliest ages are involved in so thick a cloud of doubt and obscurity, that little but conjecture can be advanced on either side of the question. It is yet certain, that the first accounts we have of any degree in advancement in letters ascribe it to the influence of poetry. Before writing was invented, mankind

had hit upon the measured strains of poetry in order to fix more firmly in their memory what they wished to retain, and to remember (any event) as near as possible as it happened. These strains were handed down by tradition from one generation to another, suffering little change, as it was less easy to corrupt these regular measures than a mere prose account, except the insensible exaggerations of succeeding bards, who wished to render their songs more glowing, & the actions they recited more illustrious. When, however, writing was invented, the first thing would naturally be to give these poems or songs a permanence & durability by committing them to writing. Prose history would therefore be a subsequent mode of composing entirely; and it is a remarkable fact, that the earliest

prose histories we have, abound in poetical embellishment, thus proving incontestibly, that poetry furnished the materials from which these histories were derived.

Poetry is the first offspring of genius, and of a youthful imagination we therefore cannot be surprised that the first literary efforts of mankind have ever been poetical. The wild pleasures of an uncivilised life, naturally tends to fill the mind with glowing images, and sublime ideas, derived from the works of nature. These things could be expressed but in poetry: the language of lofty celebration cannot be clothed in prose; and therefore, while the rapsodies of ancient days told the wonders & beauties of the natural world, or directed the attention of his hearers to the praises of their

Gods, or ~~bl~~ narated the warlike exploits, the invincible courage, the unexampled misfortunes, or the unparalleled successes, of their heroes & their chiefs, poetry alone could be the language, which, when the charms of music were superadded to it, filled every soul with extacy, and was remembered perfectly through every succeeding generation.

Poetry therefore being what men had always been accustomed to, they would find it less difficult to write than prose. With regard to their jurisprudence, it was much more necessary that their laws should be preserved accurately, in order to preserve order. They therefore, as well as the historical ~~na~~ narations, were all clothed in poetry, and when they were committed to writing, there is no possible reason to be assigned, why the first attempts at writing should

not have been in that style men had been accustomed to.

Poetry is to be found in the antiquities of every nation that has the least pretensions to literature. Even the language of our american Indians, abounds with that exuberance of metaphor, and wild luxuriance of imagery, which is always the characteristic of a poetical genius. The poetry of the East has been transmitted to us the most perfect from the earliest ages. The images there are all drawn from natural objects, and are described in a lofty tone of enthusiasm & rapture. Such images, when put into prose, entirely destroy the graver character which that should have, & render it in fact, poetry without the aid of numbers. But as this is an unnatural mode of writing, the first writers can hardly be supposed to have adopted it; but to leave

followed their usual style, and written in numbers.

It was by the means of poetry that the mythology of very ancient nations became so complicated and so perplexed. Had the first writers been prose, properly so called, the systems of theology would have been comparatively simple. But when the bards began to write their before wild & unconnected strains, they endeavored not only to reduce them to a more perfect order, but to embellish them with higher ornaments, & to add by degrees to the Tales already somewhat exaggerated. What but such a process could have framed the ridiculous machinery, and glaring absurdities of the systems of religion, in Egypt, India, Greece, & Persia? — What but the ever varying exaggerations of the first writers could

have heaped together such a mass of contradictory & impossible adventures? — And what but Poetry could have done all this? —

But conjecture would be of little avail, had we not something more substantial to depend upon. We are informed by both Strabo and Plutarch that poetry was the first mode of writing; that history as well as philosophy were clothed in numbers, and that the first prose historians while they dropt the measures of poetry, imitated the style.(1) And it appears to be well established, that the first compositions of the Arabians, the Persians, the Scythians, and the Scandinavians, together with many other nations, some of which have been already mentioned, were

(1) Strabo, lib. I.

in ~~verse~~ a poetical form. With regard to Egypt, the oldest nation in the world, the country which the soonest appears to have arrived at a high degree of civilisation, and advancement in literature and knowledge, we have the unequivocal testimony of Plato & of Clemens Alexandrinus, that such was the case with the early compositions of that country. We may add to this, ~~that~~ it was customary also to deliver the oracles of Gods in verse in the days of old. This certainly is a strong presumptive evidence that the early oracles had been delivered also in poetry, and as time rolled on, the custom was continued.

So much for the testimony of antiquity. But, on such a subject as this, it may be required to adduce some evidence from the savages of modern days, and from those

nations which appear to be at present approaching towards ~~civ~~ civilisation. Here, it must be confessed we ~~run~~ incur some risk of falling into perplexity. The vast tribes of savages at present existing on the earth, are most of them sunk in the lowest state of degradation, with few sparks of genius, and no pretensions to literature. Yet, even among these, a propensity to poetry may in general be discovered. "Even, to borrow the language of a modern writer," some qualifications, which "we esteem to be matters of taste and "elegance, and therefore least likely of "any to be found in such a state, "have been discovered among savage "nations. Thus the talent for eloquence "and even for poetry, is said to be "found in high perfection among the "Every idea, every conception, is clothed

"in image and metaphor." (2) — "The
"bones of our deceased countrymen
"lie unburied," (says an American
orator,) "they call out to us to revenge
"their wrongs; & we must satisfy
"their request. Their spirits cry out
"against us, & they must be appeased.
"The genii, who are the guardians of
"our honor, inspire us with a
"resolution to seek the enemies of our
"murdered brethren. Let us go and
"devour those by whom they were
"slain. Let us console the spirits of
"the dead, & tell them they shall
"be revenged!" — (3) In this short
specimen of Indian oratory, may
at once be perceived a boldness of
metaphor, & a strength of diction, which
only requires meanes to render it

(2) Falconer's Remarks on the Influence of Climate, Situation, Nature of Country &c. —
(3) Carver's travels.

absolute poetry. The following paraphrase may convey some idea of it in the form of versification.

Come, swell the loud, the battle cry!
Our brethren's bones unburied lie,
They call us to revenge their wrong,
And who for carnage does not long?

See their pale spirits, how they glide!
They must be soothed in battle's tide;
The guardian genii of our fame
Inspire us with a noble flame,
And bid us seek our brethren's foes,
The source of all their pain & woes!

Yes! let us haste to battle plain!
~~Devour~~ Those who our friends have slain
Console the spirits of the dead,
And tell them vengeance shall be paid.

Many other specimens of the same kind are to be found among the Indians of America; of which the

speech of Logan, as mentioned by Mr Jefferson, in his notes on Virginia, is not the least remarkable. It is too well known to need insertion in this place.

The want of regular cadence or rhythm in these productions might be attributed to other causes, which we have not leisure at present to attend to. But the voyager in that immense tract of water, the Pacific ocean, whose innumerable islands seem like the scattered remnants of some ancient mighty continent, will find among the savages that inhabit them, not only this want of metaphorical expression, which we have been speaking, but an actual existence of rhythm & versification. The next step in their literary civilization, will be the introduction of letters and it is certainly fair to infer, that

their favorite poetical productions will be the first which will be committed to writing; although it is hardly possible to draw so exact an inference either from the probable or actual conduct of the savages of the present day, continually visited as they are by Europeans, as if they were permitted to take the course that nature might dictate.

A writer already quoted (4) has advanced in support of this side of the question rather a fanciful theory. He maintains, that almost every nation which has attained great renown for letters, & has arrived at a high pitch of improvement, has had its best poets prior to its best prose writers; & hence infers that poetry is more congenial to the human

(4) Falconer's Remarks. &c —

mind; & consequently the soonest in being & rendered perfect. As instances in corroboration of his remarks, he mentions, that Homer & Hesiod preceded the prose writers of Greece; that Nævius & Ennius wrote the Roman history in verse long before it was attempted in prose; that Dante & Petrarch, in Italy, & Corneille & Racine in France, were prior to the æra of good prose composition in either country. He also brings forward England as another example, & mentions a fact, well known indeed, but well worthy of remembrance, that Milton though so harmonious, so grand, so sublime, in his poetry, is nevertheless clumsy, obscure, inharmonious, & vulgar, in his prose works; thus at once proving that his mighty genius

was able to surmount every obstacle in his poetical course, but was baffled & perplexed amid the uncouth language, & endless circumlocution, & vulgarism of expression, which strongly mark every prose writing of that period.

E.